

# Illiberalism Unbound: America's Progressive Legacy



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**The New Freedom and the Radicals: Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Views of Radicalism, and the Origins of Repressive Violence.** By Jacob Kramer. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 2015. 236p. \$79.50.

**Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era.** By Thomas C. Leonard. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2016. 264p. \$35.00.

Is there any meaningful way in which leaders of the Progressive Era can be labelled 'progressive'? Their racism and illiberalism are overpowering, and for scholars of this period, reek like chloroform. The notionally radical economist John Commons dismissed African Americans as "indolent and fickle." The august American Economics Association published and promoted John Hoffman's vile diatribe entitled *Race Traits of the American Negro* adumbrating on African Americans' "utter worthlessness." The leading eugenicists such as Charles Davenport and Madison Grant advocated the energetic exercise of illiberal state coercion to cleanse America by ruthlessly sterilizing, segregating, deporting, and preventing marriage amongst the unfit and inferior, while Irving Fisher's tract *National Vitality* demanded curbing the reckless humanitarianism which misguidedly permitted the "survival of the unfit and their perpetuation in the next generation." And it goes on, with crude dismissals of *fin de siècle* immigrants—a familiar trope in the progressive gallery of the undesirable and inferior. Eugenicists drove exclusionary immigration reform and the surge in Americanization of those who made it into the country past the restrictions (King 2000).

These alleged progressive heroes of factory laws, non-partisan ballots, and state intervention hated all those unlike themselves—dodgy immigrants, African Americans, Asians, Mexicans, and anyone else they bothered to think about who offended the ascriptive hierarchies and codes, as Rogers Smith (1997) calls them, by which they lived. Undesirables were deemed incurable. Progressives seized on eugenic solutions to rid America of these

undesirables. Theodore Roosevelt sent Fisher's book to Congress, enthusiastic about (and intoxicated by) its "fundamental importance." The leading intellectual figures in progressivism had a profound ambiguity about enfranchising women voters, worrying that the emancipated "better stock" would be diverted from child bearing, while the inferior, licentious female voters would harm democracy. However formulated, illiberal invective marinated progressivism.

This poisonous legacy clouds the contemporary scene. It is aired in the increasing recognition of Woodrow Wilson's overweening nastiness, and in the persistent burden confronting activists trying to explain why a racist inheritance is not instantly dismissible in an America tarnished by enduring inequalities (Kristoff 2016, Coates 2014, Page 2015, King and Smith 2011). Electorally, the mobilization against immigrants as undesirables reeks through the 2016 presidential campaign, quite explicitly in several candidates' cases.

And yet, Americans don't just have Donald Trump's jingoism. As in the Progressive era, the modern debate has competing forces. Voters have a Sanders version of socialism promising inclusion and laws working for the non-one per cent households: Socialism was a key radical doctrine influencing Progressives' ideas and observable in some of the era's policies. But the language used by Sanders and to some extent Trump, is the stranger because it has become remote in American politics in two ways. First, radicalism in the US since the late 1980s has been the purview of the political right (and Trump's populism extends that influence). Reaganism transformed the landscape, pressing the nominally democratic progressive Bill Clinton to enact a viciously punitive welfare reform, and to initiate a crushing imprisonment regime. In his health care and regulatory measures, only President Obama has made some inroads into the steady march of America's right.

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Second, as the books by Thomas Leonard and Jacob Kramer rehearse, a century ago the political landscape was steeped in a variety of radical ideologies and policy options from anarchism, syndicalism, and feminism to industrialism and socialism. Radical ideas from the left and right have crowded into the content and rhetoric of the 2016 presidential election, compelling the more traditional candidates to take account of proposals for the break-up of big Wall Street banks, to expand the federal minimum wage, to challenge the beneficence of free trade agreements, and to reconsider natural gas fracking. “Too big to fail” banking institutions—a core concern of progressive analyses of trusts (Lemann 2016)—is back in the political mill, catapulted by the ravages of the 2008 Great Recession and its aftermath (Clinton 2015, Warren 2015). The scale of income inequality—resonating with the Gilded Age and Progressive era—has smashed its way into the presidential debate (Jacobs and King 2016, Scheiber and Cohen 2015).

Absent from the presidential debate is attention to civil rights and the challenges posed by the Black Lives Matter movement. Certainly there is no space for these issues in the Trump or Cruz version of the Republican Party. Voters who ask off-script questions are unceremoniously manhandled out of Trump’s vast rallies. But the Democrats aren’t much interested either—Bernie Sanders pusillanimously dismissed a question about reparations (Coates 2016), and Hillary Clinton’s “natural” connection to African American voters often appears strained. This neglect of racial inequality not only rehearses a bi-partisan silence ingrained into party polarization (Tesler 2016), but also echoes the insouciance of Progressives confronted with racial inequality.

## Progressivism Defined

It is a good indicator of the scale and elasticity of the era of progressivism that these two books, both centered on progressivism and progressive thinkers, evince remarkably little overlap. The economic theories of progressive economists and eugenic obsessions of Progressives imbibe Leonard’s meticulous and scholarly study but make no appearance at all in Kramer’s useful volume.

Leonard offers up the view that progressivism was “less a coherent agenda of substantive goals than it was a technocratic theory and practice of how to obtain them in the age of industrial capitalism” (p. 10). For Kramer, progressivism was “an effort to expand the capacities of the state to address the problems of class conflict, poverty, corruption, and immorality that accompanied the rise of big business” (p. 6). Both authors accord a key place to the administrative state, as a necessary condition for progressive policies and as a legacy.

## The Illiberal Inheritance

One commonality is the oppressive presence of Woodrow Wilson. Wilson stands over much of the Progressive era

and its legacies. His stern, icy eyes and exaggerated pince nez stare out unappealingly at the reader from the cover of *The New Freedom and the Radicals*. How much damage could such a grim looking figure inflict on those fellow citizens whom he judged unfit to be equal members of his country? The answer is plenty, especially if you were African American. As Leonard observes in his study, Wilson used progressive arguments to justify his suppression of African Americans.

Thomas Leonard has crafted an elegant, original, and cleverly argued account of core progressive ideas. *Illiberal Reformers* is deeply researched, and far ranging in the deployment of primary sources. Leonard has not just recycled material from the voluminous secondary literatures on eugenics, economics, immigration, race ‘theory,’ labor studies, and Darwinism. Instead he has invariably read key thinkers’ publications and quotes from these primary documents, often to devastating effect. The book is a major achievement.

Leonard’s intellectual interest is primarily with economic ideas and the economists such as Richard T. Ely, John Commons, and Irving Fisher who paraded them. For him, these thinkers are the core of the progressive movement, their arguments extending across the spectrum from labour market efficiency and work place conditions, to hereditary exclusion of the unfit either through immigration or sterilization or both. Their aversion to the crass individualism, inefficiencies, and monopolistic tendencies of modern industrial capitalism informed the economic arguments developed for state intervention, and a commitment to the establishment of an administrative state capable, under the guidance of experts like themselves, of rational planning and ameliorative policy. They held, according to Leonard, “an extravagant faith in administration” (p. 9). The Federal Reserve, set up in 1913, epitomized this style of governance (Jacobs and King 2016), constituting for Leonard a “watershed in the formation of the American administrative state” (p. 44), but many progressive schemes rested on fundamentally illiberal arrangements (King 1999). As Leonard writes, an administrative state, to be effective, should legitimately and “regularly override individuals’ rights” (p. 22). This assumption marks out the fundamental break with and fault-line between classical liberalism and progressivist thought. Across the ideological spectrum of progressive economists from right to left wing, Leonard discovers through detailed research a striking shared willingness to “subordinate individual rights to their reading of the common good” with impunity (p. 39).

Leonard strives to eschew retrospective judgments, but his aim to be even-handed and historically sensitive becomes overwhelmed by the sheer ghastliness of these early twentieth century thinkers. Their internal contradictions and mental contortions can only defeat the modern observer: Commons’ promotion of labourers’

rights at work sits with his odious eugenics of the immigrant. One can only hope that he and his ilk would have resisted annihilating the dismissed masses of whom they disapproved. Regrettably, on Leonard's telling, these Progressives would have competed to pull the lever, and then enjoyed a reviving cup of herbal tea, pleased to have dispatched the drunken worthless dregs of humanity.

### Socialism in America?

Eugenics does not warrant an index entry in Jacob Kramer's highly competent *The New Freedom and the Radicals* (though the book's production by Temple UP is marred by rather too many proofing errors). Despite writing about nominally the same political movement as Leonard—progressivism in American politics—Kramer's focus on this movement's relationship to radicalism unexpectedly leads him away from the eugenic and racial hierarchical context into the world of four radicalisms: anarchism, syndicalism (represented by the IWW), socialism (Debs), and revolution overseas (from Mexico to Russia to post-WW1 Europe). Kramer homes in on how Wilsonian Progressives responded to these four tendencies from the late 1900s to the mid-1920s. The narrative moves in and out of how key figures—such as Florence Kelley, Helen Keller, Jane Addams, Louis Brandeis, George Creel, W E B Du Bois, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann—responded to and interpreted the intense demands of radicals.

Kramer's thesis is that the way in which progressivism related to these four radical strands of political organizations and ideas was a crucial determinant of the evolving concept of progressivism. Although his interest is with individuals and their choices, this relationship was mediated by context: scale of industrial strife, wartime, socialist pressures, and fluctuating attitudes toward militants, especially militant immigrants. He traces a path toward 'repressive tolerance'—a contradictory term, which he takes to mean what level of repression was tolerable to progressives in electoral office.

Kramer is impressive in laying out the four strands of radicalism and documenting their development chronologically. The book retains the feel of its origins in a doctoral thesis, with careful organization, cautious argument, and an overly formal effort to judge its findings against a schematic literature review in the closing chapter. Kramer's explanation for the shifting relationship between progressivism and radicalism is ultimately a listless one: "progressivism and radicalism were not always fundamentally similar, but the place of radicalism within progressive thought followed an identifiable pattern depending on the circumstances" (p. 3). Those varying circumstances consist in the presence or absence of economic crisis, war, presence or absence and level of intensity of internal political violence, the level of power held by progressives, and the potential importation

from overseas of revolutionary threats and ideologies. As a chronology, these conditions turn largely on pre WW1, wartime, and then the post-war Red Scare era of the Palmer raids. Kramer documents many of the most brutal industrial disputes vividly conveying the scale and ferocity of strikes, the role of the IWW and Debs' organization, and the alacrity with which 'broad minded' progressives embraced illiberal repressive measures of internal security to match their illiberal social principles.

Kramer has used some archival sources, but when using the language of his key thinkers and activists he relies extensively on quotations from other scholars' books. The book therefore lacks the flavour of novel research or original documentation usually associated with first monographs by historians. The book's quality and importance must rely on the interpretative claim. Here Kramer does a commendable job of assembling and organizing the material for his argument. He demonstrates sophistication in presenting and assessing competing sources of ideas among leading progressive thinkers and contributes to our understanding of the coagulating forces in this era and their dynamics.

### The Wilsonian Problem

However, because of the way he defines and sets up radicalism, historian Jacob Kramer underestimates the significance of Woodrow Wilson's White House incumbency as a destructive force on the contemporaneous status, and then the ensuing prospects, of African Americans. And this persists despite centering much of his analysis on the Wilsonian era. In one passage he dismisses Wilson's enforcement of segregation in the federal government as "de facto" rather than official policy and, therefore, somehow as less consequential. Admittedly Kramer is drawing on secondary sources about this fundamental restructuring in the relationship between African Americans and the federal government. Such documents would have informed him of the explicit Wilson policy to segregate by race within the federal government and the deliberate demotion or redundancy of many black civil servants (King 2007), which wrecked hardship on their household incomes and those of their children and grandchildren. Kramer buys the canard that Wilson kept his segregationist policy at arms-length and could therefore claim not to be personally responsible or aware, a position which was contradicted by Wilson's avid racism and shouting exchange with Monroe Trotter and other civil rights activists who dared to challenge his injection of segregated race relations into the federal government. It was Wilson's Treasury Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Treasury who reported their outrage to the President that white and black women worked in close proximity to one another in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The President ended such, to him, unforgivable arrangements. His actions ensured the

administrative state was a segregated state (King 2007, Rung 2016).

The legacy of Wilson's restructuring endures (Rung 2016). The economic carnage has been described by descendants of several victims of the Wilson era discriminatory segregation (Davis 2015). Such belittling of these racial processes make the historical analysis offered in *The New Freedom and the Radicals* close to complicit in Americans' historical forgetfulness about this era. This central episode in Wilsonianism is little more than a footnote in Kramer's study, yet its illustration of the vapidness and racialized core of much of his 'radicalism' ideologies is unmistakable. Kramer is tone deaf about the perverse beliefs underlying these ideologies and how those beliefs survived the destruction of ideological options.

It is curious of Kramer to place W.E.B. Du Bois amongst his group of progressives and not to discuss how mistreated he was by the dominant white progressives including Wilson, who consistently dismissed as fruitless the prospects of equal citizenship for African Americans. Du Bois's great study of Philadelphia was ignored by white progressives, who considered black voting rights preposterous. Ignorant of African Americans' role in the Union army, economist John Commons was apoplectic that "this race, after many thousand years of savagery, was suddenly let loose into the liberty of citizenship, and the electoral suffrage" (quoted in Leonard p. 50). For Commons, addressing the unequal status of African Americans would only subvert American democracy not achieve it. Du Bois paid a bitter price for allying to the American cause after the United States entered WW1.

### **The Programmatic Challenge: Too Big to Work?**

Both authors recognize the development of the administrative state as pivotal to progressive aims and reforms. This institution got decisive expansionary jolts during the war and relatedly as workplace reforms were enacted. Leonard's analysis underlines how much progressive economists were motivated by the inadequacy of the market—"American markets no longer served the public good" (p. 32)—and saw themselves as disinterested experts better able to manage the economy. This disinterestedness and expertise easily slide into a broader illiberal "intelligent social engineering" project. The elements of engineering stretched from the benign (regulation of work conditions and helping pensioners) to the intrusive and illiberal (immigration restrictions and a program of involuntary sterilization, upheld in the Supreme Court).

For American political development, a singular achievement and legacy of the Progressive era was the administrative state, a bureaucracy prompted by the combination of Woodrow Wilson's presidency and U.S. mobilization for WW1. But this American administrative state was distinct comparatively, assuming a much greater

national regulatory rather than policy delivery character, a distinctness of continuing significance (Fioretos, Falletti and Sheingate 2016, Valelly, Mettler and Lieberman 2016). Fewer direct powers of planning were achieved by the national state than progressives had anticipated and lobbied for. Wartime also made income tax a reliable revenue source for the modern state, something expanded greatly by Franklin D. Roosevelt (Sparrow, 2011), and heralded the arrival of economists as experts in such government agencies as the US War Industries Board. Institutionally a springboard for the New Deal, WWII mobilization and the Great Society resulted. Planning and agency expansion during the First World War offered a pathway for New Deal programmes.

The death knell of New Deal style liberal activism has been announced on numerous occasions, especially by critics of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 campaign. Such proclamations are premature. The Affordable Health Care Act shows that there is no inherent limit to the passage and enactment of comprehensive public policy measures, though the design and implementation of this health care program fits with the American state's institutional distinctness.

Where the progressive tradition of planning and administrative capacity lacks reach is on the persisting material racial inequalities bequeathed to the U.S. political system from the Progressive era, in terms of crude racial hierarchies, and the New Deal era, in terms of racialized policies with entrenched institutional effects (Gerstle 2015, Katznelson 2013). Since the 1980s, the dominant thrust of political debate has been to emphasise individualism (privatising as much as possible, stigmatizing and punishing welfare recipients) and to legitimate it by reference to a vacuous color-blind ideology (King and Smith 2014). This is the legacy of the Reagan initiated era dismantling of the administrative state, expressed most recently in the Paul Ryan review of the war on poverty. But in fact small government has not precluded comprehensive state intervention as demonstrated in the political economy of mass incarceration (Gottschalk 2014, Lerman and Weaver 2014). Nor have its advocates been able to explain how the deep problems of material racial inequalities will get addressed in the absence of comprehensive, universal, and enforced federal government action. In his response to Bernie Sanders, the public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates (2016) rehearses the "facts" that cannot be "evaded:" "from 1619 until at least the late 1960s, American institutions, businesses, associations, and governments—federal, state and local—repeatedly plundered black communities. Their methods included everything from land-theft, to red-lining, to dis-enfranchisement, to convict-lease labor, to lynching, to enslavement, to the vending of children." He adds: "So large was the plunder that America, as we know it today, is simply unimaginable without it. Its great universities were founded on it. Its



early economy was built by it. Its suburbs were financed by it. Its deadliest war was the result of it" (2016). The lachrymose agenda of enduring inequality remains wearily familiar and urgent.

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